



# Fact Sheet

## Meeting the Challenge of Rising Food Costs for Healthier School Meals

### KEY ISSUES:

- Providing healthy and appealing school meals when food prices are increasing can be a major challenge.
- Savvy school foodservice directors can manage tight food budgets and provide nutritious meals to their students, while working to implement the *2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.
- USDA commodities are available to help schools meet their nutrition and financial goals.

**M**any school districts are feeling the squeeze of increasing food costs. It can also be challenging to provide school meals that meet the *2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

What can school food service managers do to meet these challenges? Some strategies include: maximizing use of available commodities, purchasing foods in season, focusing on lower-cost foods, increasing participation in school meals programs, tightening procurement practices, and sharing cost-savings strategies with others.

### Recipe for Success

The following strategies may be helpful in controlling costs:

- **Revamp cycle menus to serve less expensive, popular student choices more often.** For example, serve spaghetti instead of lasagna, using whole-grain commodity pasta to reduce food costs.
- **Serve low-cost beans or other legumes more often as a meat alternate or vegetable choice.** For example, serve a bean and cheese burrito, substitute kidney beans for some of the meat in chili, or offer garbanzo beans on a salad bar.
- **Train staff to follow standardized recipes precisely.** Every extra scoop costs money! For example, don't add extra ground beef to the spaghetti sauce recipe.
- **Serve portion sizes according to the recipe.** For example, serve a level ½-cup scoop of mashed potatoes, instead of a heaping scoop.
- **Plan age-appropriate portion sizes.** Serve the food-based optional portion size for grades K-3 to better target their calorie and nutrient needs and reduce waste.
- **Join a purchasing co-op to help maximize your purchasing power!** Combine bids with neighboring school districts to purchase larger quantities at lower prices.
- **Use canned, or frozen fruits and vegetables more often.**
- **Compare produce prices among various vendors.** Contact local farmers about products they can supply at a reasonable price. If available, use the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. Buy fresh fruits and vegetables in season to get the best price and peak flavor.

## USDA Commodity Food Program

USDA continually explores better ways to offer healthier food choices that help schools offer meals consistent with the *2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Whole grains, reduced fat meats and cheeses, lower sodium canned vegetables, and canned fruits with less sugar are some examples of these healthier offerings. Information about commodity foods is available at [www.commodityfoods.usda.gov](http://www.commodityfoods.usda.gov). Check the list of available foods at: [www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/foods/SY09-schfoods.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/foods/SY09-schfoods.pdf).

- **Market your program as a good value to students, teachers, staff, and parents to boost participation.** Compare the cost of a typical lunch brought from home to school lunch.
- **Create new customers through catering!** Showcase healthy menus at board meetings and other school events. Cater classroom parties or activities.
- **Complete an annual procurement plan** based on your menu to maximize the use of commodities, especially for the more expensive items.
- **Order some bulk commodities** to stretch your commodity entitlement.
- **Become a partner with your State Distributing Agency** to ensure the most cost effective ordering, distribution, and delivery system.
- **Use "mealtalk"** to share cost-saving ideas with others.



## For more information:

**National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI)**  
at [www.nfsmi.org](http://www.nfsmi.org)

**Provides:**

- Training materials on Financial Management, First Choice: A Purchasing Systems Manual for School Food Service, Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs Instructor Manual and Participant Workbook, Measuring Success with Standardized Recipes.
- Telecasts on effective financial management, cooperative purchasing, procurement and inventory control.
- Fact sheets on research related to cost control, purchasing, and financial decision making.

**Food and Nutrition Information Center Healthy Meals Resource System** at [healthymeals.nal.usda.gov](http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov)

**Provides:**

- Purchasing and Procurement resource list and Menu Planning and Preparation resource list.
- Web site links to materials developed by State agencies, other government agencies, and food product associations.

**Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)** at [www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/policy.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/policy.htm)

**Provides:**

- Policy Memorandum, 04-2008, Incorporating the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans into School Meals, 12-17-07.



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